Creative Writing MA Dissertation

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Photograph Albums of the Dead:

Imagining the Unsayable through Poetry

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The task and delight of poetry is to say what cannot be said

- Alan Watts

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i. Saying the Unsayable

most people are perfectly afraid of silence — E.E. Cummings

Wittgenstein in a Chimerical City

Do the *rules* follow the language?
The tension
between lanes
a dual carriageway
twisting
into the conurbation
of dilemmas.
We must not be so seduced
by slogans
in the outer rings,
the grey
metropole
swallowing whole
the principle of verification
forcing us
into a physical world.

Do these hoary monuments
lead to *Infinity?*
Standing above
the relative field
of experience
the *primes* of ancient church spires
stare,
melancholy against the hum
of modern assemblies -
the chime is white
and black
and those who see it

will be called insane.

Do we need maps
when we are asleep?
What was there and what was not
do not exceed
the things said.
His passions would be general
which is real enough
when using
specifics
as mere examples.
Will we awake in time
to think aloud the *numbers,*
form the scaffold?
Writing without words
the truth about *love.*

Forecast

I have read runes
on the hartstongue -
white veins
souring blue skin

how does the sky
suffer
such bitter
philology -

sheltering
the secret semantic
of ferns
and seedcases

shouldering
a parliament of rooks
slandering
our souls

My Garden in February

guarding
the tongue's passage

a silver membrane
of evergreen

catches the dawn light
ensnares the chorus

in a fairy-ring of birdsong
that hums without sound

binding
the inside of colour

Still

I saw a flame in the forest

Just the moonbeams, bowing

Heard the still of the woodman's axe

It was the late summer fruits, falling

There was blood on every branch

Rowanberries, dancing

My son's name whispered through the leaf tongues

The autumn wind, laughing

His footsteps fell in the bloody chamber

The fallow deer, running

Is he sleeping now, in the warm sway of milk and teardrops?

On a leaf bed, under the oak tree

Does it rain forever in these dark woods?

All winter long, my love

What happened to the acorns, the one's he drew from my heart?

Birds eggs, fallen

I will plant them, under my tongue

See how the embryo still sleeps, its wet wings folded under its shell

The Sister's House

You can see beyond the ruin
if you look into their eyes.
The blue grey stones are not yet
dead, although lichen floats

like a cloak around the crumbs
of the chimney breast and grass
grows in the hearts of them
that grazed here. Sighting them

through a water lens, a dissolving
rain, I survive that their bodies
make fire here again, love imagined -
they vanish as smoke or memory

II

We feign that flesh is our only
enchantment; the core
of nature - mineral, aggregate
erections - a progression of leaders,

followers, spoiling, laying. But some
thing beyond the tropospheric
stirs the ashes, ignites the aperture.
Beyond the ruin, a buzzard divides

the firmament- snatches the cadence -

cold red, not yet dead. If they could speak
they would ask us to remember the litany
of water - the whisper of it - unchanged.

Romeo y Julieta

A man and a woman are playing cards.
It is as it should be - in a dimly lit room
on a folding table with a green felt top.
The whole thing looks like it could collapse

at any moment. She handles the hearts
like a pro, dividing the deck with bitten
lips, long sleeves and wounded nail-polish.
He traces the presence of absence

with a fat cigar and the weight
of a single malt mixed with moonlight.
Later, on the table, matches
are stacked and pennies, and at least

thirty pieces of silver, like little leaning
towers. She wears the scent of long
dead flowers. He is afraid of heights.
What have they got to be smiling about?

Hearing Voices

The trees
know what I mean.
As does the sea
having no voice, but
being voice. Mindfullness
colours the slant of waves -
passing over me, into another room
where all is quiet, save
for the gentle thud
of a door
closing.
Thinking aloud
the tones of love and loss -
rising falling knowing
from the beginning
how it will end.
The doctors never change their tune.
They wait in the harbour - dead
to the sound
of impermanence.
This much I have always known -
The word for lost
is the same
as the word
for found

Pwll Deri

'Dewi Emrys 1879-1952'

a thina'r meddilie sy'n dwad ichi pan foch chi'n ishte uwchben Pwllderi'

and these are the thoughts that will come to you when you sit above Pwll Deri'

easy to miss footfalls
in the twist
of thrift

purple
like the sun's
blush

below
numinous presence
no witnesses

even seals
muzzle the silence
stir the blood -

a water-rush
of clarity
preternatural

weightless
wordless
leap of faith

Unspoken

A secret fell from a seventh floor window,
flung out in a frenzied exchange. As it plummeted,
incidents from its life raced across the face of the moon.
The secret saw its birth; small, insignificant, why,
so small it spent its first few years in a pocket.
Then there was shouting, being hurled at a door,
followed by a shoe, then a bottle or two. Being stamped
on, stretched and twisted, hidden in the back of a drawer.

It remembered a warm welcome, the ache
of a young woman's heart. The brittle mystery
of wintering there, before being thrown out into the street.
Good times, bad times, being woken at dawn,
dragged out, slapped, still, it lived on; voiceless, true
to its word, spending these last few years folded
between the pages of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*.

The secret, having held its tongue against the decades,
decades of late nights and insults, cried out at the cruel
stab of the jabbering river. But the moon shrank
from the shriek of silence, the spell broke, the secret
sank, and the river licked its heart - its tears drowned
by the sound of the watercourse, its soul aground
against the bitter grit of the river's crooked-sixpence bed.

Later, a woman with no hair and a long name
that everyone had forgotten
noticed its remains by the strand,
where, last summer, a child was found

with its hand on the shore. The woman wept
so openly, having no secrets of her own to hold,
I was moved to give her mine.

Many Treasures (for Shannon)

It is the heart that counts -
deals the high numbers.
It is the heart made mud pies
that stuck and dried
on the paving stones in my back yard.

In time cracks appeared
which is only to be expected
given the hard ground, south-facing aspect
and dry throats all round
that summer.

Sure-footed, sage
you came of age
washing dishes six pound an hour
a plate of chips, and a cheeky spliff
at closing time.

How much for the decade
the gifts you gave?
So small you stand on a stool
washing dishes, careless,
cash in hand - I let slip down the plughole.

It is the heart that counts -
passes through the broken windows of the world.
Bringing many treasures
the moon and stars
even a single day.

ii. The Language of Water

Glory is like a circle in the water,
Which never ceaseth to enlarge itself,
Till by broad spreading it disperses to naught

- *William Shakespeare.*

`

Like Water

Sometimes I long for the strong
bones of the river to break me.
Long to taste the brack of cool limbs
tearing my own, separating my flesh -
the heave of it - into pools and swells
that pulse and flow past letting go
through the spill and bleed
of essence, she licks me into droplets, parting.

Oneness is an Odyssey
a forked path, pricked with holes to fall into, deliberately.
Without question; choices - deliberating
distance between hands -
a body of water - catching
the drips of my own vessel, sagging
under the weight of my own stones
I bow out (like water flowing, crashing).

Qualia

i

Like a stream
running across your neighbour's land

through a forest
over rocks

summoning you
to be in two places at once

nothing
leading to nothing

where nobody knows you
and no thread

for you to follow
back to the shore

where nobody waits for you
anymore

ii

like a door
in the water marked 'Loss'

fathomless swell of sadness
heaving the wooden frame.

a voice
seeping through the gaps

what was that?
you thought you heard something

it was nothing
you hear yourself say

The Language of Water

i surface tension

apparently

contains a word,

like a shell

passing the shore

(as language -

carried out to sea)

ii. ice

dissolving truth

holds

the liquidity of speech-

broken -

illuminating existence.

(on ice)

iii. tide

traces

the leaving behind -

(signs in the sand)

- unreadable -

covered

by the sea

iv. drop in the ocean

unending

swell:

the word

inside.

Outside the word:

orbit -

silence, breathing, lost, language

v. wave

writing - without memory -

- meta- morph- osis -

non-meaning

fluid

as words

engulfed by silence

vi. shallow

like a teaspoon -

the mind

streams -

circling the heart breaking

waves

vii. fluid

words in exile ---

(reading the self)

naming

the memory of water

viii. flood

like loss

- speaking

the moment -

circling

the absence

of being

A river runs through me,

crossing through my inner landscape like a pen. I on one side
of this great divide, on the other, a strange woman lives; in a house
identical to mine. Every day she stands there, outside her house
all day, staring. I hoped she might go away one day, but,
even at night, when, unable to sleep, I peep behind the curtains
she is standing there still, watching me.

Even when sleep takes hold, and I go under, she is there,
on the other side of mind, looking at me, with her strange eyes,
from across the water. Sometimes a river, sometimes a stream, but
always this body between us, this insistent A to B idea.

Every morning, I rush out of my house in the hope
that she will be gone. But, even in the pouring rain, she is still there,
standing outside her house. I stand there too, not knowing
what to do, till I am soaked through, till my head aches
and it feels like my thoughts no longer hold water.

I shout across at her, I am losing my mind, go away, I have lost
my mind, but she does not reply, and my words flow down the river
like a long, illegible note I wrote to myself and lost, sometime ago.
Some thing inside of me snaps, I feel like I am split in two,
and; unable to hold myself back, I set fire to my house, take off
all my clothes and throw myself in to the river.

The current is strong, and it takes me all day long to swim across
to the opposite shore. It is nearly dark when I reach the riverbank. I
crawl out exhausted, unable to speak. I look for the woman
but there is no one there, only a different woman, standing

on the other side, outside a burning house, watching, waiting for something to happen.

iii. Maternal Silence

motherhood has become an oppressive institution and a space of loss - Melody Nixon

Separated at Birth

I turned myself into a paper bag to survive the war. By accident
we found ourselves on opposite sides so I turned myself
into a paper bag that I might still be of service to you. After all
what can a paper bag say or do but carry your many secrets
and your outright lies and remain hidden; a perfect disguise.
When I thought it was safe I revealed myself but you accused
me of having an easy ride. But here are your secrets and your lies;
I kept them for you, I cried. I slipped under doors, I folded myself
into the size of a cigarette paper, what more could I do?
In the distance a street light flickered and a bell rang three times
before you crumpled me into nothing with your empty hands.

Unable to sleep, I walk into town

and pass through the back door of an all-night cinema.
Inside it is empty and I am wondering where I should sit
when I see another me sitting two rows from the front, feet up
with a bucket of popcorn. The film starts - a silent feature
in black and white - ghosts acting out scenes from my life
with melodramatic piano accompaniment. The other me is laughing
and spilling popcorn all over the place when the scene changes
and I find am watching myself sitting on a train, journeying
through the night. The other me is in the same carriage, staring
out of the rain-streaked windows. Nameless stations pass
like all the years of my life and I fall asleep. Then a voice shouts
this is your stop and I jump up and find myself on an empty platform
without lights, nothing and nobody in sight, but the other me,
getting into the only taxi, driving off into the night.

Thursday Afternoon at the Supermarket

Somewhere between the lunch time rush
and the after work crush In the never never
measure of foil wrapped wonder
I forgot there was no room in my refrigerator
for 24 tubs of strawberry yogurt on BOGOF
and filled my gondola, before floating off
into another aisle with teenage mums mouthing
the lyrics to muzak, and smiling toddlers arching
out of trolleys, and rows of powdered milk
and pastel coloured plastic bottles gleaming
on shelves. Instinctively, my body beamed
and my hand reached for the swell of my belly.
In a clash of strip-lights and metallic hums
and no frills special offers succumbed
I fell into the aisle of years long gone,
I forgot the flush of my empty stomach,
the untold expectation of myself, carried away.

Another Reason I Don't Watch Soap Operas

Married to their houses
while their husbands
cheat on them they worry
about dogshit on the lawn
while their children grow
weed in the garage.
When their husbands
drop dead from trying
to live in a washing
powder commercial
they lie in bed till noon
watching makeover shows
planning an new kitchen
to impress those bitches
sipping spritzers, picking
at chicken wings.
They renovate the en-suite -
a walk in wet-room
with white white tiles
and brite brite lights
over a mist-free mirror
where they find
the face of a child
who turned into their mother.
They fret about financing
the next face lift
before the child benefit runs out,
while trying to ignore
that lingering smell
permeating from under the patio.

how to be, what to do

being
that
trickiest
of conjugations
to do -

being
that
either is fine -

except
when being
unaware
of what
one
is
doing

Photograph Albums of the Dead

thick pages separated from their grim epoch
pages separated with tissue, gentle, embossed
smelling of draughty bathrooms
and disinfectant, soaking up light
and yellowing sticky corner pieces
like the wings of dead flies, and dead flies

and always a child in sailor's suit
and a stroll on the prom tiddly om pom pom
and a great rick of a harvest
or haymaking, hands on sleeves rolled
and time with its long black
hands turning over

a wedding with a cake made of industrial
promises and polyfilla, a dress
stitched for the occasion
by a woman who never spoke again
with a spit soaked needle
and an eye that pierces

strange how the missing ones -
black pools bordered by the bleach of time -
describe in such detail the nothingness of being
how silence instead of a name or a face,
particularly when given date, time or place
goes deeper than this hall of mirrors

is this what you will grab
when you walk into a room and your life is on fire
smoke signals, souvenirs of loss, pinholes in the void?
and always this darkness - you recognise it -
it lived at the top of the stairs
in the house where you were born

existentialism for mothers

imagine
the space before speech
the primal other of all Others
beating cushions
brushing
under beds
until the dusty presence of absence
is swept from the house

picture her cooking
with the forces of death
and nothingness
leaning
over the sink
to soak away the dark stains
of doubt and insecurity
(knowing they will need washing again
tomorrow)

see how
she arches her back
until she resembles
the mythical bridge of the eternal present
where her children play

long after they have gone
to bed
she hovers
under the thin light of alone

darning a hole in the real
with a needle as sharp as the truth
of separation

imagine

Mother

oneness beyond language
loss beyond words

Orphan of Silence

three drops of my blood
rose
red
and my apple, plucked
sweet
poison
parting my lips
I will
give
to my huntsman, dear
with his blade, sharp
to bribe
the one
who cut out my tongue
and buried it
in the heart
of the forest

Imaginary Friend

i

who is the speaker
given to translation
of the Nothingness of myself

ii

Silence brushed past
as I lay listening
to a tap dripping in a dank bathroom
on the other side of town

it swallowed my existence
and I became
something far away
like a speck of dust or a grain of sand

iii

sitting next to me
minding my own business
the soft flat body
made of old clothes stuffed
with past lives and eyelids
that rattled like moths' wings
in brittle oversized head
and closed when you lay down
as though you had been put to death

I heard your name
as though it was the first time
faint, far away like it belonged to the stars
or someone else

iv

and always this guilt
this extra page torn out
the author's voice, choked

and silence, smelling of funeral parlours
and the last word in a lost language
stuck in the back of my throat

Solipsism

the mind is a hostile landscape
a sort of arctic tundra
freezing winds

criss- crossing the permafrost
a continual conversation -
harsh words falling

without precipitation
on distant ice caps -
a glacial silence

treeless plains, marked
by the stark reality
there is no mind, other than this polar night

imagine the self alone,
under the sudden song
of a midnight sun

melt water thawing the tongue,
quiet as frost,
naming the thing itself.

Last Impression

who could sit in your chair
the only thing left
bearing any true likeness of yourself

smelling of Navy Cut
and old rope
wearing the impact of chronic depression

what good are photographs
doorways to death, empty mirrors
that capture only the absence of yourself

outside the first snow of evening falls
covering the imprint of loss
with another layer of memory

I will not disturb
the sagging seat pad
of its dusty slumbering sway

how else will we tell
other than through this soft stoop,
this last impression of your inner life

a.m.

One night, waiting for Sleep
another came to rest beside,
another grown old and tired
of clocks and days and numbers.

I did not hear her soft step,
or feel her slip beneath sheets
like a sleepless child.
Motionless, we lie together

listening to the faint rattle
of a far-away train,
a vixen's shriek, a drunk
in the street singing singing

in the rain. We watch
the moon untangle her hair
before she floats away
to find another dressing-

table mirror to gloat in.
I do not see my companion's face,
though I imagine her as pale,
and silver-fox fair. Instead I catch

the slap of morning tide
against fishing boat's side,
the spat of raindrops
breaking on glass.

I turn to take her in my arms
but there is only the familiar cold
embrace, as morning cracks
and the sky begins its pouring.

iv. Critical Commentary

Overview

The American Modernist poet Wallace Stevens believed 'there are two opposites: the poetry of rhetoric and the poetry of experience'.[1] I concur with Stevens' thinking. A dry, rhetorical engagement with the search for order and meaning within the impermanence of the human experience is out of place. The inscrutable nature of being incites a creative, imaginative and passionate response. This is the aim of this dissertation.

I have a long-held interest in existential, anthropological and philosophical ideas of unsolvable or unfathomable oppositions. Reading Margaret Atwood's novels in my teens, I was fascinated by her exploration of themes of identity, alienation, self and consciousness; particularly through her use of doubled or split characters wrestling with contrasting ideas of subject/object, man/woman, self/other.[2] Anne Sexton's poems have also been an inspiration. As a sufferer of mental health problems, in my own writing I have always been drawn to examine similar personal themes; but, until I embarked on the MA, I had never adopted a

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[1] From Wallace Stevens, *Adagia* (1934-40/1957), in *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry,* eds. W. N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis, (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2000), p. 58.

[2] See particularly, *Double Persephone*, (Toronto: Hawkshead Press, 1961), *Two Headed Poems*, (London and Toronto: Simon & Schuster,1981), *Alias Grace*, (New York: Doubleday,1996)

focused writing practice - the poems just wrote themselves when they were ready to be written.

Prior to completing the poetry modules, I always felt that something was held back in my writing, something lay just beneath the surface and either would not or could not be expressed. As my understanding of poetry developed, I became aware that many poets were interested in exploring ideas of being. As I read and observed the ways they were manipulating forms and pushing language to achieve their aims, the inarticulateness inside of me, my inability to transform what I wanted to be able to express into a meaningful narrative, took on a different dimension. It was not lack of craft or practice that I was struggling to overcome, it was not the fact that the subject or content of my poems was, somehow, unspeakable or unacceptable, it was language itself that was the barrier.

German philosopher Martin Heidegger described poetry as 'the establishment of being by means of the word'.[3] However our experience through our senses and mind, and our thoughts and words about our experience are not the same thing. Words can only point to our experience; they cannot express the thing itself - what it means to be, to feel one's self alive. Virginia Woolf's character Bernard in her novel *The Waves* articulates the dilemma perfectly:

[3] Martin Heidegger, 'Holderlin and the Essence of Poetry', (1949), in *Elucidations of Holderlin's Poetry*, ed. Keith Holler, (New York: Humanity Books, 2000) p. 55.

> But how to describe a world seen without a self? There are no words. Blue, red — even they distract, even they hide with thickness instead of letting the light through. How describe or say anything in articulate words again?[4]

Thoughts are not strictly thinkable, while feelings and perceptions cannot be perfectly translated or verbalized.

While considering how to incorporate my interests into my dissertation, I discovered a copy of *Parable Island* by Pauline Stainer in a second-hand bookshop. The poem 'Sourin' contains the lines:

> The poetry is not firstly in the words;
> a bright moon
> holds shoals to the sea-bed
>
> Salt bruises the rose
> to the vibration of a magical string
> without sound[5]

I was hugely inspired by the brevity of her writing, the emotional freight it carried and the range of her source material. In an online

[4] Virginia Woolf, *The Waves,* (Ware*:* Wordsworth Editions Ltd; New edition, 2000), p. 246.
[5] Pauline Stainer, 'Sourin', in *Parable Island*, (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 1999), p. 14.

journal Stainer describes the inspiration she found on Rousay Island, her former home, off the Orkney mainland:

> I look out at the 'phrasing of spray' and hillsides scattered with neolithic tombs [...] This search for the divining shiver, at once mysterious and accessible, informs all my work.[6]

This 'divining shiver' that Stainer refers to represented the essence of what I was trying to illuminate through poetry; a sense of being on the threshold of two existential planes - an experience for which everyday language seemed inadequate, yet; because of the intangibility that the concepts of 'self', 'mind', 'voice', 'identity', 'consciousness', 'perception' and 'memory' raised, nonetheless invited a creative response.

Although I have pushed and challenged myself throughout my MA to work outside my comfort zone and break into new ways of writing, I felt daunted by the idea of saying the unsayable, and by the many philosophical and existential dilemmas it raised. Positive responses to the work produced for the poetry models led to an increased enjoyment in both my reading and writing practice. This gave me the confidence to tackle a complex theme for my dissertation, while my personal experience of Dissociative Identity

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[6] 'Pauline Stainer Reviews Pauline Stainer', *Within North*, (28th April 1997) http://nd.edu/~ndr/issues/ndr7/stainer/story.html, [accessed 19/09/2012].

Disorder (more commonly known as Multiple Personality Disorder) offered an additional dimension to the challenge.

The poems have been separated into three sections, each representing a different engagement with confronting the limitations of language, and expressing 'that zig-zag between the self and the moment'.[7] The first section considers some of the barriers presented by language, and samples some strategies poets have used to counter these restrictions. It shows particularly the influence of Stainer in exampling economy of expression, and the dislocation of language, to this end. The second uses the metaphorical language and imagery of water, while the third focuses on surreal or enigmatic composition as a response.

The poems are arranged in this way both to impart a sense of order to the abstract subject matter, and to create a feeling of movement, or evolution within the collection. Ideas and images reoccur within the sections; for example rain, the sea, rivers, ice caps and a dripping tap appear across the collection. This repeating and altered representation of water imagery creates resonances of shifting forms of perception and identity, as well as suggesting the sense of progression I wanted to achieve. Unintentionally, the theme of death also recurs throughout the portfolio, corresponding to the nature of human experience and the constant presence of the narrative of loss within life; a compelling topic for poets throughout history.

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[7] Pauline Stainer, 'Mantegna's Hares', in *Crossing the Snow Line,* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2008), p. 80.

Saying the Unsayable

This first section is particularly focused on language. Words are unavoidable to the poet, yet they introduce the concepts of definition and meaning to the process of writing. While definition might appear to be a very precise, immovable thing, Virginia Woolf, again, explains through her character James Ramsey's struggle to reconcile the competing images of the lighthouse within his mind, that a clear cut definition is a limiting perception -'For nothing was simply one thing'.[8] The novel suggests that to admit the complex, even contradictory, nature of all things, is to possess a greater (and more artful) understanding of life.

Is there a single 'thing' or 'object' that we can state as being 'meaning'? Austrian Philosopher and polymath Ludwig von Wittgenstein argued that 'meaning is use' - words are not defined by references to the objects they designate, nor by the mental representations one might associate with them, but by how they are used.[9] He famously concluded that, 'what we cannot talk about we must confine to silence'.[10]

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[8] Virginia Woolf, *To The Lighthouse,* (Ware*:* Wordsworth Editions Ltd; New edition, 1994), p. 60.
[9] Ludwig von Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, (Oxford: Blackwell's 1953/2001), #47.
[10] Ludwig von Wittgenstein, *Tractus Logico-Philosophicus, (1922),* in Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value,* ed. G. H. Von Wright (in collaboration with Heikki Nyman), trans. Peter Winch, (Oxford, Blackwells, 1980), p. 24.

The poem 'Wittgenstein in a Chimerical City', (p. 1) employs these considerations to suggest the contrasting illogicality in the poet's drive to articulate existence through enriching language, against the philosopher's attempt to access truth or reality non-linguistically. The title came from Stainer's poem 'Christ in a Chimerical Landscape', which fuses the vocabularies of religion and science.[11] Wittgenstein advised 'philosophy ought really to be written only as a form of poetry'.[12] In my poem I wanted to allude to the dichotomy between philosophy's tendency toward generalities and its use of specifics as mere examples, and poetry's inclination toward details, with generalities mainly as a kind of framework or overview. The language is deliberately ambiguous; blurring the boundary between poetry and philosophy and suggesting the inadequacy of 'meaning'. For example, through italicizing certain words associated with philosophical dilemmas, and through the use of indistinct meanings: 'His passions would be general' (p.2) is adapted from Shakespeare and refers to Hamlet's passions as being 'true', as opposed to wide-ranging or unclear. The poem also makes reference to love, the one thing that seems to be missing from Wittgenstein's intense and eclectic life.

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[11] In Pauline Stainer, *The Ice Pilot Speaks*, (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 1994), p. 37.

[12] Ludvig von Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. Henrik von Wright, (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1998), quoted in 'Introduction', *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, by Marjorie Perloff, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 1.

The arrangement of words into the structured, linear form of sentences, and the ordering of language through rules of grammar, does not reflect the fluid, multi-dimensional nature of existence. Language also changes through history. Novelist, philosopher and essayist George Steiner defines language as a 'living organism', and, with particular reference to the German Language after the Second World War, describes the manner in which words such as 'liquidate' and 'ovens' could never 'recover a sane meaning'.[13] While George Orwell posited that, over time, words change the way we think and the way we think can change words. Through the use of euphemism, rhetoric, and political correctness, 'lies sound truthful and murder respectable'.[14]

When writing the poems in this first section I was particularly conscious of the inherent limitations of the medium. Inspired by Stainer's use of brevity and silence, I wrote 'Forecast' (p.3) and 'My Garden in February' (p.4) with a deliberate economy. Stainer has been described as 'The Emily Dickinson of Essex' and the influence of Dickinson's distinctive compressed poetic can be clearly seen in Stainer's concise, potent language.[15] This linguistic distillation

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[13] George Steiner, 'The Hollow Miracle', *Language and Silence*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), p. 117.
[14] George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language', *Horizon*, London volume 13, (issue 76, 1946), pp. 252-265.
[15] 'Contemporary Poets 18: Pauline Stainer', *The Independent, Arts and Entertainment*, (11th October 1992). www.independent.co.uk-arts-entertainment-contemporary-poets-18-pauline-stainer-1556709.html. [accessed 17/09/2012]

'grant[s] the poetry its power',[16] a power 'through silence to capture the true essence of intimacy'.[17]

These poems are among the most reworked in the collection. I found that when editing a very short poem, changing just one word could alter the entire balance of the poem prompting a rewriting of the whole piece. They represent a major departure from my previous work and I was concerned that what I was trying to convey would be lost in this severely-abridged poetic. However, brevity concentrates the language and increases ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning. This equivocality seems to work to their strength. They have an enigmatic quality, evoking the unfathomable nature of being, and suggesting something outside of the text. Unexpected phrasings - 'binding/ the inside of colour', (p.4) 'white veins/ souring blue skin', (p.3) also prompt the reader to look beyond the apparent; again intimating something exists beyond the words.

The blank page encircling a short poem is highly significant, as poet and novelist Simon Armitage comments:

> Poetry like radio enjoys the open space that surrounds it, and it invites the imagination to fill that space. On the radio that space is silence, […] in poetry that space is

[16] William Franke 'The Missing All' - Emily Dickinson's Apophatic Poetics, *Christianity and Literature,* Vol. 58. (No.1 Autumn 2008), p. 63.
[17] Margaret H. Freeman 'Emily Dickinson and the Discourse of Intimacy', *Semantics of Silence in Linguistics and Literature,* Eds. Gudren M. Grabher and Ulrike Jessner, (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter 1996) pp. 199 - 201.

> the empty white paper surrounding the text. In a short poem, a whole universe can be constructed in just a couple of lines.[18]

Working with such economy of expression raised the moral dilemma of being careful not to duplicate or reproduce the work of another poet. 'My Garden in February' contains the lines 'in a fairy-ring of birdsong / that hums without sound'. Despite multiple re-workings, I was concerned that this felt too close to Stainer's earlier-quoted 'Sourin'. Reading and imitating the work of other writers, however, is an acknowledged path to develop and gain confidence in one's own voice.[19] In addition to Dickinson, echoes Stevens can be heard in Stainer's poetry, particularly in the notion of imagination within reality, the use of symbols, and the playful, yet sharp, intelligence evident in both their work. Reviewing Stainer's *The Lady and The Hare*, David Morley refers to Stevens as 'one of Stainer's talismanic influences'.[20] Influence is entirely different from replication of another writer's work, as Seamus Heaney explains:

> You hear something in another writer's sounds that flows through your ear and enters the echo-chamber of

[18] Simon Armitage, 'Precious Little', *Short and Sweet*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p.xii.
[19] See Peter Samson, *Writing Poems*, (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 1994), pp.16-18.
[20] David Morley, 'A Spring in Her Heels', *The Guardian*, (Saturday 22 November 2003), review of Pauline Stainer, *The Lady and the Hare*, (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2003).

> your head [...] your first steps as a writer will be to imitate, consciously or unconsciously, those sounds flowed in - 'in-fluence'.[21]

Stainer speaks of 'the imaginative truth of myth' in her work.[22] She uses myth, legend, history, divinity, science and nature to create an inner landscape of the imagination which 'free[s] the language to produce a parallel creative world - the poem itself'.[23] The poems 'The Sister's House'(p.6) and 'Still' (p.5) were inspired by this idea. 'Still' uses two voices, akin to Stainer's 'Scarecrow' to construct an imaginary, enchanted realm.[24] The fairy-tale language and subtle, rhythmic, slightly haunting exchange enhance the imagined, otherworldly setting. While the juxtaposing of the two voices, the use of italics and large spacings, offer opposing perspectives and alternative meanings. This has a dislocating effect on the language, akin to Eliot's use of the 'objective correlative' - whereby an object is described as behaving as (or conforming to) something else, as a means of presenting an alternate perception and evoking an emotive response.[25]

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[21] Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose* 1968-1978, (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 44.
[22] Stainer, *Within North.*
[23] Derrick Woolf, 'The Art of Pauline Stainer', *Notre Dame Review,* issue 7, (Winter 1999) http://www.nd.edu/~ndr/issues/ndr7/stainer/art.html [accessed 19/09/2012].
[24] *The Poetry Ireland Review,* No. 64, (Spring, 2000), p. 110.
[25] T.S. Elliot 'Hamlet and His Problems' in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism,* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921).

The exchange of voices in 'Still' produces a musical quality which, in addition to the visual appearance of the poem as mentioned, asks the reader to respond to more than the words. The final exchange is unanswered, intimating the incommunicable experience of loss; in this case, that of an unborn child.

'Hearing Voices' (p.9) also invites the reader to interpret the poem outside of the text; in this case through the shape the poem makes on the page. The wave formation represents the cyclic nature of life, the need to let go, and echoes the water motif featured throughout the collection. It appears again in 'Unspoken' (p.11), which adopts a narrative form akin to Simon Armitage's story-poems - 'tinged with latent violence'.[26]

Allegorical symbolism encourages the reader to reflect beyond the words apparent, while alliteration and internal rhyme give 'Unspoken' an aural texture, drawing attention to the act of storytelling:

> But the moon shrank
> from the shriek of silence, the spell broke, the secret
> sank, and the river licked it's heart - its tears drowned
> by the sound of the watercourse, its soul aground
> against the bitter grit of the river's crooked sixpence bed.

[26] Alastair Beddow, reviewing *Seeing Stars* by Simon Armitage, *in The Literateur,* (1st May 2010), http://literateur.com/seeing-stars-by-simon-armitage/ [accessed 12/08/2012].

This offers a further dimension beyond the verbal, evoking a whimsical, playful tone as a counter to the subject matter. It also reiterates the fairy-tale, imagined world of earlier poems, and offers a hint of the quirky surrealism which appears later in the collection. References to a tongue, the river licking; and shouting, shrieking and jabbering, underline the poem's aural qualities and highlight its self-reflexivity.

Self-reflexivity, according to Professor Helen Vendler, serves an important function for the poet trying to express the subtle nature of existence:

> when a poem is said to be about poetry the word 'poetry' is often used to mean: how people construct an intelligibility out of the randomness they experience
> [...] how they [...] achieve what Keats called a "Soul or Intelligence destined to possess the sense of Identity''.[27]

Like 'Unspoken', the final poem in this section uses alliteration and internal rhyme to enhance the aural effects. 'Many Treasures (for Shannon)' (p.13) was written following the death of sixteen-year-old girl whom I used to babysit, and directly illustrates the theme of

[27] Helen Vendler, *Emprise Review*, (2nd January 2012) www.emprisereview.com/tag/metapoetry/[accessed 12/08/2012].

death reverberating throughout the collection. The poem offers a Buddhist perspective in examining the unspoken aspects of a young person dying, and emphasises the importance of a single day of life, by repeating the line 'It is the heart that counts' at the beginning of the first and final stanzas.

Following Shannon's death I experienced a crisis of confidence regarding both my ability as a poet and my choice of topic. The creative process, like the nature of being, is practically impossible to pin down and, at its most distilled, functions at a kind of non-linguistic level. Don Paterson explains:

> Poetry, for me at least, is still an occult science (we should not forget that Gilles de Rais, the original Bluebeard, was charged - along with murder, alchemy, necromancy and unnatural sexual intercourse - with the crime of *poetry*).[28]

It is impossible to just make a poem happen, and I found writing poems with a precise strategy or intent, such as economy of expression, constricting. In the same way that the creative process itself is not prescriptive, so the form of a poem unfolds as it is worked on. Working in modes that felt rigid and inflexible fed my frustration and self-doubt. One of my strategies for overcoming writers block is

[28] Don Patterson, 'The Dilemma of the Poet', in *How Poets Work*, ed. Tony Curtis, (Bridgend: Seren, 1996), p. 156.

walking. The rhythmic aspect, as well the liberation from cerebral activity, can release blockages and encourage, or allow, the mystery of creative energy to flow. From my house, overlooking a bend in the river Teifi, I can see downriver to Cardigan Bridge and up to the sweep of Poppit Sands at the Teifi Estuary. I was drawn to reconsider an earlier idea I had contemplated for the portfolio; that of writing about different water-forms, but pressures of time and the thought of starting again were now adding to my anxiety.

As American poet Anne Stevenson wrote:

> Without 'inspiration' and flights of imagination, how can poetry exist? How will it come into being in a form of spontaneous expression beyond, as it were, the limits of language?[29]

Her advice for overcoming obstacles was to 'Trust the poem, forget the poet'.[30] I began writing down words and phrases like 'spill', 'flow', 'current', 'stream of consciousness', 'body of water' and 'water of life'. The words themselves carried within them an implication of 'letting go', and trusting the process, as Paterson describes:

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[29] Anne Stevenson, 'The Only Green in the Jungle', in *How Poets Work*, ed. Tony Curtis, (Bridgend: Seren, 1996), p. 47.
[30] Stevenson, p. 46.

> Almost invariably, poems arrive in the form of words, not ideas. I don't think poets get ideas for poems, they get words; that's there gift, and they forget it at their peril.[31]

The Language of Water

'Like Water' (p.15) takes the subject of letting go, and was written as an exercise in trusting the process. It marks the beginning of the second section of the portfolio, and my motivation to work spontaneously with words and follow whatever direction this took me. In the poem the forces of both life and death are underscored by images of creation and destruction, while the indistinct, illusory choice between the two is emphasised through its unquantifiable depiction - 'a body of water'. Unintentionally, there is an element of my feeling split in two by frustration, anxiety and the pressure of deadlines. I think it adds an authenticity to the poem which vindicates the notion that there is a spiritual element to writing, and a necessary faith, or confidence, in the mysterious process that accompanies it. Alliteration and rhyme are again used to impart an aural energy, which is amplified by the recurrence of sharp, violent imagery - the longing for the 'bones of the river to break me', 'to taste the brack of cool limbs / tearing my own, separating my flesh'. The dichotomy of life and death is again stressed by the ambiguous

[31] Paterson, p. 156.

ending; using contrasting words 'flowing, crashing'[32] to draw an unspecified conclusion.

The sequence of short, fragmented verses 'The Language of Water' (pp.18-25) was inspired by the work of French existentialist poets Jacques Dupin and Andre du Bouchet. In the de-structured arrangement of Dupin's verse, 'emptiness is given a textual presence'.[33] It is the 'unifying principle' flowing through 'the womb of space' surrounding the 'jagged words', 'unintelligible fragments' and 'lacerating syntax', 'like a beneficent, silent energy'; resulting in a poetry that reflects 'the fundamental precariousness of being itself'.[34] De Bouchet's work is composed of *'Lettres aérées. Lettres à flot'* (Airy letters. Floating letters), giving the blank space surrounding them increased significance.[35] Syntactic linearity is deconstructed, and through this interruption words enter into a relationship with the beyond, so the 'voice of nothingness become / word again'[36]

'Flood' uses a 'non-referential simile'[37] - 'Like loss / speaking / the moment' (p.25) - akin to that within De Bouchet's 'L'Intonation', although De Bouchet makes the absence of a point of reference even more distinct through preceding it with a black dot:

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[33] Richard Stameleman, *Lost Beyond Telling: Representations of Death and Absence in Modern French Poetry*, (New York: Cornell University Press, (1990), pp. 170-175.
[34] Jacques Dupin, *L'embrasure*, (Gallimard: Paris, 1969), pp. 134, 82 & 50.
[34] Stamelman, pp.173, & 175.
[35] Pierre Chappuis 'Dans un livre que je n'ai pas sous la main', *Andre de Bouchet, Collection Poètes d'aujourd'hiu*, no. 239, (Paris: Seghers, 1979), p. 102.
[36] Andre du Bouchet, *d'ésaccordeé comme par de la neige et Tübingen*, le 22 mai 1986, (Paris: Mercure de France, 1989) p. 16.
[37] Stamelman p. 177.

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Comme

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perdu[38]

This increases ambiguity and indeterminacy within the text, creating a sense of language as ungrounded, and the relationship between words as in perpetual metamorphosis. While I appreciate the cathartic nature of writing in this form, and its assistance in overcoming my creative blocks, I feel its indistinctness lacks authority, and I doubt I shall return to it in the future.

'A river runs through me' (p.26) takes the form of a prose poem, linking it with work that appears later in the collection, and introducing a more conventional, continuous structure as a contrast to the previous work. It was inspired by Mark Strand's 'The Tunnel', in which the tormented author digs a tunnel to escape from a man who 'has been standing / in front of my house / for days', only to

[38] André de Bouchet, 'Laisses' in *Laisses*, (Paris: Hachete, 1979), unfolioed.

discover the watcher is himself being watched.[39] Strand's poems often feature multiple projections of the self or imaginary states of existence, which Linda Gregerson terms an 'evacuation of the self'.[40] I interpret this as representative of the duality of the spiritual and physical elements of being, and the anxiety caused by their contradictory natures. Both Strand's poem and mine are concerned with loss and loneliness, and the strange irony whereby we would sometimes rather destroy what we have than share it, or give it away.

Strand's poem closes with the lines:

> I feel I'm being watched
>
> and sometimes I hear
>
> a man's voice,
>
> but nothing is done
>
> and I have been waiting for days.[41]

[39] Mark Strand, 'The Tunnel', in *Reasons for Moving*, (New York: Atheneum, 1968), p. 13.
[40] Linda Gregerson, 'Negative Capability', *Parnassus Poetry Review,* 9.2 (1981), pp. 90-111.
[41] Strand, p. 13

My poem ends on a similar note - 'I look for the / woman but there is no one there, only a different woman, standing on the other side / [...] watching, waiting for something to happen'. (pp. 26-27) This helplessness symbolises the lack of awareness we have regarding the dualistic aspects of life, as well as the sense of powerlessness felt when confronting the incommunicable nature of being. The phrase 'sometimes a river, sometimes a stream, but always this body / between us', echoes the 'body of water' mentioned earlier in 'Like Water', reinforcing the indefinability of the human experience.

Reading Strand's surprising, anomalous verse re-activated my interest in the relationship between poetry and philosophy, and in particular, Heidegger's theories regarding artistic expression as the essential path for uncovering, or 'disclosure' of, truth and being.[42] He concluded that poetry is 'the authentic gauging of the dimension of dwelling' - dwelling being synonymous with man's existence in the world.[43] Thus poetic, rather than philosophical, language is the vehicle through which ideas of being can be uncovered or revealed:

Maternal Silence

Former U.S. Poet Laureate and essayist Charles Simic wrote:

[42] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans J. Stambaugh, (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), originally published in 1927
[43] Martin Heidegger, 'Poetically One Dwells' in *'Poetry Language and Thought'*, trans. and collected by Albert Hoffstadter, (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 227

> Silence, solitude, what is more essential to the human condition? 'Maternal silence' is what I like to call it. Life before the coming of language. That place where we begin to hear the voice of the inanimate. Poetry is an orphan of silence. The words never quite equal the experience behind them.[44]

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Simic's ideas informed much of the work in the final section of this collection, in which silence, absence, existentialism and the unconscious are recurring presences. The existential and ontological functions of language are also significant in Strand's work, where 'the poem frequently is, for writer and reader, the perfect moment of existence' and a place where 'the imagination encompasses all'. [45] [46] Simic also maintains that 'only wildest imaginings can bridge the abyss between word and thing'. [47]

'Wildest imaginings' lie behind the strange, dreamlike 'Separated at Birth' (p.29), and 'Unable to sleep I walk into town' (p.30). Both take the form of prose poems to offset the surreal content, and feature bizarre, inexplicable details - 'in the distance a street light flickered and a bell rang three times / before you crumpled me into nothing with your bare hands', and, 'I see another me sitting two rows from

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[44] Charles Simic, 'Negative Capability and its Children' *Anteus,* (Spring 1978)
[45] James F. Nicosia, *Reading Mark Strand*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 195.
[46] Ibid. p. 58.
[47] Charles Simic, *The Unemployed Fortune-Teller: Essays and Memoirs*, (Ann Arbour: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 56.

the front, / feet up with a bucket of popcorn'. Such oddities might seem incongruous, but in the mind of the dreamer they would make perfect sense, as Strand clarifies - 'dream and myth are very much at the heart of what I do'.[48]

'Separated at Birth' illustrates the difficult relationship I have with my mother. I was pleased with the way the poem manages to be intensely personal, without becoming overly confessional, as my previous poems dealing with this subject have tended to. As mentioned earlier, I have long admired the work of American confessional poet Anne Sexton. She rejected the 'reductive implications' of the term confessional, preferring to call herself a 'storyteller', rationalising: 'I do have a feeling for stories, for plot, and maybe the dramatic situation'.[49] By 'adopting a persona, speaking in the first person from the point of view of a character' she was able to fashion a unique and powerful voice for her domestic and mental anguish.[50] By using surreal images to manipulate the concept of double meaning, blur the boundary between mother and daughter, reality and illusion, truth and deception, I was able to avoid the pitfalls of overly confessional writing which, if not handled well, can seem like it is straining too hard for effect. I was also able to identify with Sexton as a poet beyond the limiting label of confessional. Her

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[48] Jonathon Aaron, 'About Mark Strand', *Ploughshares*, 21.4 (Winter 1995), p. 205.
[49] Diane Wood Middlebrook and Diana Hulme George, eds. 'Introduction', in *The Selected Poems of Anne Sexton*, (London: Virago, 1993), p. xiii.
[50] Ibid. p. xiv.

'confidence in the power of words in sequence to carry sense, beyond the mind's power to make sense' is exactly what I want to achieve.[51]

Strand also adopts a persona for the self as author and engages with, or satirises, it in his poems, creating an intertextuality, and what Foucault termed 'endless referentiality', whereby ideas of being and existence are constantly reframed through their interrelationships within, and beyond, the text.[52] This is the sense I wanted to construct within these prose poems - a surreal layering of ideas, images and identities suggesting the multiple dimensions of existence.

Comparisons can be drawn between 'Unable to sleep' and Simic's 'Description', whereby Simic acknowledges the dialogue between self and other when he speaks of 'a corner where / a part of myself // keeps an appointment / with another part of myself'.[53] Simic allows the language itself to speak - adopting Heidegger's theory 'to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself',[54] so that language itself is the 'House of Being'.[55] For Heidegger, thinking and poetic expression

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[51] Ibid. p. xvi.
[52] *Foucault, Health and Medicine*, eds. Robin Bunton and Alan Peterson, (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 32.
[53] Charles Simic, 'Description', first published in *Charon's Cosmology*, (New York: George Braziller,1977), reprinted in *Selected Early Poems,* (New York: George Brazilier, 1999), p. 121.
[54] Heidegger, *Being and Time,* p. 7.
[55] Martin Heidegger, 'Letter on Humanism',(1947), in Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 239.

are essentially the same; indeed he terms thinking the *'urdichtung'* or 'primal poetry'.[56]

The notion of something primal within language, or of language itself speaking, led to my exploring the imaginative realm of childhood, and the voices forms, shapes and memories that populate it, in the poem 'Imaginary Friend'. (p.39). There is so much unsaid about childhood, what happens to what we leave behind there? Surreal images again take centre stage, and, while the actual construction of the poem is very ordered, there is a sparse, fractured feel to the language, and a searching, inquisitorial tone throughout. Silence and listening are emphasised through the poem's aural characteristics; in onomatopoeic words like 'brushed', 'rattled' and 'brittle', and the reference to a tap dripping. A sense of distance and remoteness is established through the bathroom being 'on the other side of town', and through the repetition of 'far away' in the second and third stanzas. The self-reflexive aspect within the poem offers an irony and double-ness enhanced by these repetitions. Despite the references to death, it demonstrates the playful absurdity that surrealism can bring to a poem, and indicates how friction between style and content can work to a poem's strength.

In discussing the speaker in his poems Simic explains:

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[56] Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, lecture series at the University of Frieberg, (1935), trans. by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 131.

> '"I" is many. "I" is an organizing principle, a necessary fiction. Actually I'd put more emphasis on consciousness: that which witness has no need of a pronoun'.[57]

In writing all the poems within the collection, I was conscious of this idea. I subscribe to Simic's proposition - the 'I' in my poems is not necessarily autobiographical, but instead serves to give voice to the sense of spiritual or mythical consciousness, or 'otherness' - 'That in all of us which belongs to the universe'[58] - to which Simic makes reference in his essays.

In exploring further techniques for giving voice to the ineffable, I was interested in the way Simic, in his early poems, engages with inanimate objects; forks, blades of grass, stones, his shoes and his shirt for example.[59] He describes the voice of these objects as:

> That in all of us which belongs to the universe. The mother's voice calls its name over the roofs of the world. Whoever hears it turns toward his ancestral home. A hallowed moment.

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[57] Charles Simic, 'Domain of the Marvellous Prey', interview with Richard Jackson, (first published in *Poetry Miscellany*, 1978), in Richard Jackson, *Acts of mind: Conversations with Contemporary Poets,* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1983), p. 19.
[58] Charles Simic 'Some Thoughts on the Line', *The Uncertain Certainty: Interviews, Essays, and Notes on Poetry,* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1986), p. 113.
[59] See Charles Simic, 'Fork', 'My Shoes', 'Stone', in *Dismantling the Silence*, (New York: Jonathon Cape, 1971); 'Broom' and 'Shirt', in *White*, (Minnesota: New Rivers Press, 1972).

> Timeless presence which has no language. Whoever senses himself existing has no need to say much[60].

I was intrigued by the seeming simplicity of these poems and the depth of emotion they carried. The idea of turning towards an 'ancestral home' suggested the poet as being outside of, or alienated from, this place, but - through the experience of silence - he is able to hear 'the voice of the inanimate', and speaking through these mute, everyday objects he re-establishes the connection.

'Last Impression' (p.42) was written in this vein, taking the favourite chair of a deceased person as the conduit for the voice of otherness. Again there is a playfulness underlying the surreal images, expressed through the puns within 'depression' and 'impression', and the vernacular language: 'smelling of Navy Cut / and old rope'. The short stanzas, each introducing a separate intangible idea or image, give the poem a broken, abstract feel enhancing the sense of detachment and loss, which itself is described as having an 'imprint'. The metaphor is sustained throughout the poem, providing a consolidating form to offset the intangible subject matter.

A quotation from Wallace Stevens explaining his theory of 'the first idea' provided the inspiration for 'Photograph Albums of the Dead' (p.34):

'If you take the varnish and dirt of generations off a picture, you see its first idea. If you think about the world without its varnish and dirt, you are a thinker of the first idea.'[61]

The image of a dusty old photograph album, and the missing photographs, which 'go deeper than this hall of mirrors', suggest that their absence - expressed as 'black pools bordered by the bleach of time' - offers a more informed communication as to the nature, or 'the nothingness of being' than that of the gaudy pictures. To enhance this idea, the photographs are described in animated language; 'always a child in a sailor's suit / and a stroll on the prom tiddly om pom pom', which provides a backdrop of period detail, as well as a lively verbal texture. This is underscored by the use of repetition - both within individual stanzas - 'yellowing sticky corner pieces / like the wings of dead flies, and dead flies' - and through the poem as a whole. The refrain 'and always' is used to both introduce the photographic images, and the idea of the unsaid which closes the poem:

and always this darkness - you recognise it -

it lived at the top of the stairs

[61] Wallace Stevens, *The Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens, (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996), pp. 426-427.

in the house where you were born (p.35)

I wanted to construct an eerie anxiety within the poem - old photographs can be very evocative. The potent image which closes the poem accentuates the sense of disturbing obsession introduced at the beginning of the poem through the phrase 'grim epoch', and reinforces the theme of death informing the entire collection.

I feel this enigmatic, surreal, yet very plain language represents my most successful poetic voice. As a non-English Literature graduate, I often felt my grasp of literary language and terminology was lacking, and my writing, both creative and critical, was weakened by this. Poet David Constantine insists that words 'become poetic by their rhythm, by how they consort'.[62] My recognition and understanding of the differing aural, visual and textural effects created through words associating with one another in space and time has enabled my poetry to mature, and my voice to evolve. I feel that my relationship with language has been transformed through my increased awareness of its philosophical significance, particularly Jacques Lacan's proposal that language itself may actually be the 'otherness'. Lacan argues that the unconsciousness is structured like a language; it's 'Symbolic' and 'Imaginary' aspects functioning to

[62] David Constantine, 'Common and Peculiar' in *Strong Words, Modern Poets on Modern Poetry,* Herbert W.M and Matthew Hollis (eds.) (Newcastle-upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 2000), p. 42.

either support or distort what he describes as 'the discourse of the "Other".[63]

In the preface to her collection *Keeping Mum*, former Welsh National Poet Gwyneth Lewis wrote, a poem is a 'translation without an original'.[64] Ideas or thoughts are recreated within a poem from an event or experience that has already happened. This involves the poet as a witness projected back into the past, and the poem as a staging, or repeating of something that, because of the nature of thought, never actually happened the first time. In *The Monument,* Strand plays with this idea of the poet as translator, constructing a discourse between self and other through the relationship between the 'author' and non-existent future translator.[65] His speaker suggests to his translator how the idea of 'Otherness' is conveyed through language: - 'find words for which you yourself have a fondness … If "nothing" conveys the wrong idea, use "something".[66]

In the case of the final poem in the collection, 'a.m.' (p.43), the 'something' is the notion of loneliness adopting a comforting persona. Loneliness is described as 'another', and is given a physical form with 'her soft step' and imagined face. The language is sparse and uncomplicated. Linguistic effects are played down with simple, onomatopoeic internal rhyme - 'the slap of morning tide / against

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[63] Jaques Lacan, *The language of the self: The function of language in psychoanalysis*. Trans. Anthony Wilden, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968), p. xviii.
[64] Gwyneth Lewis, *Keeping Mum*, (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2003), p. 10.
[65] Mark Strand, *The Monument*, (New York: Ecco Press, 1978).
[66] Strand, *The Monument*, '#14'.

fishing boat's side, / the spat of raindrops / breaking on glass.' This serves as a contrast to the curious, quirky images - 'a drunk / in the street singing singing // in the rain.' and a gloating moon untangling her hair. This is my favourite poem within the portfolio. It represents a fusion of my love of aural effects - 'the way sense writhes in the sound of words' - and surreal images, while also managing to maintain a concise expression.[67] I have tried writing about insomnia and loneliness in the past, unsuccessfully, but through an awareness of the philosophical functions of language use, I was better able to manipulate language and image to produce the desired effect.

Aspects I still find challenging when writing poems are choosing where to position line breaks and deciding on a poem's title. In the past I have focused on sound when considering where to break the line, but for this collection the theoretical subject matter necessitated a more organised approach, which is why the majority of the poems are arranged in regular stanzas. I agree with Simon Armitage that:

> titles should be working parts that can open and close a poem, or devices on which a poem can swing, and the best place for such a hinge is snug against the frame.[68]

[67] Middlebrook and George p. xiv.
[68] Simon Armitage, 'Goalkeeper With A Cigarette', in *How Poets Work*, ed. Tony Curtis, (Bridgend: Seren, 1996), p. 97.

This is why I choose not to place the title centrally, and why the title runs into the body of the poem in 'A river runs through me'.

Armitage also feels there is something 'pompous and extravagant' about capital letters and central justification in both title and body of a poem, and again I agree.[69] Describing myself as a poet is still not something I am entirely comfortable with; there is a pretentiousness about it that doesn't sit right. According to Don Paterson, 'Poetry, like murder, describes an act, not necessarily a permanent disposition'. With this in mind the poet is in service to the poem, and any feelings of self-conscious aggrandisement are replaced as 'the poem annihilates the poet'.[70] The result is a 'fading of Being' removing personality through letting go of the "I" in order to communicate the other.[71]

I consider my best writing results from a fusion of imagination and confidence in language. Simic writes the 'only principle or technique I'm aware of is faith. Faith to the language and faith to the situation to which that language points. Nothing else'.[72] While Strand explains:

> What happens at certain points in my poems is that language takes over, and I follow it. […] And I trust the

[69] Ibid.
[70] Paterson, p. 154.
[71] Richard Jackson, 'Charles Simic and Mark Strand: The Presence of Absence', *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 21 (No1. Winter, 1980), p. 141.
[72] Charles Simic, 'The Partial Explanation' in *The Uncertain Certainty*, p. 103.

> implication of what I'm saying, even though I'm not absolutely sure what it is that I'm saying.[73]

Through, inspirational, imaginative and surreal use of language both poets succeed in translating an idea of Otherness that transcends language; something that exists in the very heart of our being, yet cannot be named. This experience is essentially spiritual, an act of faith, a letting go. While I believe it is not be possible to attain an accurate verbal depiction of human experience, there is an authenticity within the silence that feeds the poetic imagination. Only through faith in the language of the imagination can we truly connect with ideas of consciousness and realize that 'True silence is the untying of the tongue, letting its words go'.[74]

[73] Wallace Shawn, ' Mark Strand, The Art of Poetry No.77', *The Paris Review*, no. 148, (Autumn, 1988), <www.the paris review.org/interviews/1070/the-art-of-poetry-no-77-mark-strand>
[74] Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 44.

v. Bibliography

Armitage, Simon, *The Selected Poems of Simon Armitage*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2001).

- This collection demonstrates the sharpness of Armitage's wordplay and the variety of his subject matter. I particularly enjoy the edgy language, and fast pace of his narrative poems

Armitage, Simon, (ed.) *Short and Sweet 101 Very Short Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002).

- Armitage offers a witty introduction to this varied collection, which was very insightful regarding working with an economy of expression.

Astley, Neil, (ed.) *New Blood* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 1999).

- The informative introductions by the featured poets, discussing the background and approach to their writing practice was useful when considering choices and options and methods within in my own compositions.

Bloom, Harold, *Mark Strand: (Bloom's Major Poets*), (Chelsea House Publishers, 2005).

- Interesting biographical information providing a background to Strand's early poems.

Bloom Harold, *Wallace Stevens, The Poems of Our Climate*, (London and Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1976).

- Detailed biographical information relating to Stevens' double life as an Insurance Executive and one of the twentieth century's leading Modernist poets. Bloom admits he has difficulties in interpreting Stevens' work, which assisted me in accepting my own struggle to grasp some of Stevens' ideas. Bloom and traces three phases within the poet's work and makes a case for Stevens as a Romantic visionary, celebrating his linguistic exuberance.

Bishop, Elizabeth, *Poems,* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin,1958).

Bishop, Elizabeth, *Selected Poems,* (London: Chatto and Windus,1969).

- Bishop's poetry examines internal dilemmas concerning distance, separation and loss through close attention to details in the external world. Her themes of identity struggle and restlessness, and her beautiful, subtle, surreal language and imagery are hugely inspirational.

Cavel, Stanley, *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*, (New York: Charles Scribner's & Sons, 1969).

- This essay collection fuses philosophy, science, anthropology and psychology offering a multidisciplinary strategy through

which to analyse the ontological functions of language. It was especially helpful regarding analysis of Wittgenstein's ideas and presented a very humanistic approach to philosophy, langauge and thought.

Curtis, Tony, ed. *How Poets Work*, (Bridgend: Seren, 1996).

- A fascinating collection of essays form ten poets discussing their view of the mysteries of the creative writing process. The pieces by Anne Stevenson, Simon Armitage and Don Paterson were especially useful when analysing and contextualizing my own writing practice.

Franke, William, '"The Missing All": Emily Dickinson's Apophatic Poetics', *Christianity and Literature*, Vol.58, (No.1, Autumn 2008) pp. 61-76.

- A very informative discussion of Dickenson's poetry, focussing on the idea of what is not expressed as a vehicle for understanding the paradoxical nature and spiritual dimension of Dickinson's verse. It was useful in contextualizing my own poetry and that of other poets who have inspired this collection.

Fraser, Kathleen, *Translating the Unspeakable: Poetry and the Innovative Necessity,* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2000).

- This essay collection discusses the difficulties of the creative process; and presents thought-provoking insights on a range of

issues, as well as different poets' strategies for overcoming obstacles. It helped me deepen my understanding of risk taking, and letting go as a fundamental to the writing of poetry.

Gross, Philip, *Changes of Address: Poems 1980-1989*, (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2001).

- Gross' haunting poems consider loss and a struggle for a sense of security in a twenty first century context. I particularly admire the sense of space and stillness he builds into his poems, and his beautiful, lyrical language.

Herbert W. N, and Matthew Hollis, eds. *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2000).

- This collection of essays charts many different poetic movements through biographies of 77 poets. Key historical essays, or specially commissioned articles, offer an excellent resource in which the poets discuss both their writing practice and the motivation or philosophy behind it.

Jackson, Richard, 'Charles Simic and Mark Strand: The Presence of Absence', *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 21 (No. 1,Winter 1980) pp. 136-145.

- A fascinating essay which enabled me to put Strand's and Simic's ontological theories into both literary and philosophical contexts. It prompted me to examine my own relationship with

language, and to apply my awareness of these theories to my writing.

Johnson, Wendell Stacy, 'Auden, Hopkins and the Poetry of Reticence', *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 20 (No. 3, July1974) pp. 165-171.

- Analyses the influence Gerard Manley Hopkins had on W. H. Auden's verse with particularly emphasis on Hopkins' use of reticence when composing work of a deeply devotional nature.

Leigh, Sue, *Saying the Unsayable*, (unpublished doctoral thesis, Aberystwyth University, 2010).

- A number of areas of interest to me are explored in this outstanding thesis, most particularly Leigh's commentary concerning the inadequacies of language and economy of expression.

McCabe, Susan, *Elizabeth Bishop Her Poetics of Loss,* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).

- This biographical study reveals the background to the ideas of loss which became part of Bishop's identity as a woman and as a writer. Through analysis of both poetry and prose against a social and historical framework the book presents a moving portrait of a unique and powerful voice.

Middlebrook, Diane Wood, *Anne Sexton: A Biography,* (London: Virago, 1992).

- Middlebrook used notes from Sexton's psychiatrist to compile this account of Sexton's life and work. It offers a fascinating insight as to Sexton's motivations for writing, and her intense commitment to her art.

Middlebrook, Diane Wood and Diana Hume George (eds.), *The Selected Poems of Anne Sexton,* (London: Virago,1991).

- This collection has continued to inspire me - Sexton's beautifully crafted exploration of challenging themes prompted me to begin writing poetry. The introduction provided an informative evaluation of Sexton's life and work.

Mijuk, Goran, *Orphan of Silence: The Poetry of Charles Simic*, (Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Friborg, Switzerland, 2002).

- This thesis presented a very thorough analysis of Simic's entire body of work, and the philosophical and linguistic interplay within his writing. Each of his collections is examined, alongside his essays, reviews and translations, against a background of his developing ontological theories, his position as a Serbian exile, and how this impacted on his poetry.

Nicosia, James F, *Reading Mark Strand*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007).

- This provides an excellent background to Strand's poetry through close-reading and theoretical consideration. It enabled me to better understand Strand's methodologies and approach my writing practice with an increased awareness of, and confidence in, what I was trying to express.

Orwell, George 'Politics and the English Language', London, *Horizon*, volume 13, issue 76, (1946) pp. 252-266 http://mla.standford.edu/Politics_English_language.pdf [accessed 16/09/2012]

- This classic critique on the lack of clarity and sincerity in written English is as relevant today as when it was written. Orwell's six rules for avoiding bad habits informed the reading, researching and writing of much of this portfolio, particularly the importance of the editing process in maintaining a concise and distinct expression.

Sansom, Peter, *Writing Poems,* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 1994).

- Sansom's informative guide encourages developing poets to adopt a critical approach to their work through the analysis of a range of poems and poetic forms, as well as suggested writing tasks, procedures and techniques.

Serio, John N. (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Wallace Stevens,* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

- This series of essays by leading commentators presented a detailed theoretical analysis of Stevens' poems and aesthetic principles. It also offers an informative chronology of Stevens' life and work, and was especially helpful regarding understanding Stevens' theories relating language, ideas and the imagination.

Shaver, Gilbert J. 'Review of "Martin Heideggar: Poetry Language and Thought by Albert Hofsteader', *boundary 2*, Vol. 1 (No. 3 Spring 1973) pp. 742 -749.

- Through reading this essay, I was better able to grasp Heidegger's ideas concerning linguistics and philosophy, and to, therefore, work with an awareness of them when constructing a critical framework for my own writing.

Simic, Charles, *The Metaphysician in the Dark* (Michigan US: Michigan University Press, 2003)

- Simic discusses an assortment of themes, and offers witty and insightful interpretations of the work of a range of writers and artists in this very accessible essay collection. It helped me to understand the motivations behind his poetry and to view writing in the wider context of living an artistic life.

Simic, Charles, *Sixty Poems* (Washington: Harcourt Brace, 2008).

Simic, Charles, *Looking for Trouble,* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1997).

- Simic's simple language, bizarre flights of fancy, attention to detail and use of images that are, at the same time, disturbing and amusing were hugely inspirational when writing this portfolio.

Stainer, Pauline, *The Lady and The Hare,* (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 1989).
Stainer, Pauline, *Parable Island*, (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 1999).

- Stainer's economy of expression and use of symbolism and mythology within her work are captivating. Her clarity of voice and range of subject matter are a constant inspiration to my own writing.

Stainer, Pauline, 'The Art of Pauline Stainer', a review of The Wound Dresser's Dream', *Within North*, (April 28 1987) www.nd.edu/~ndr/issues/ndr7/stainer/story.html, [accessed 19/09/2012].

- Stainer's analysis of her own work presented the poems in a different light, as, although I still find her difficult at times, I understand this is due to the challenge of what she is expressing. Her startling, imaginative poems are a constant inspiration.

Stamelman, Richard, *Lost Beyond Telling: Representations of Death and Absence in Modern French Poetry*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1990).

- Through the analysis of the work of a range of writers this book encouraged me to further explore the writing of challenging themes within my poems. The chapter on De Bouchet and Dupin, and fragmented discourse inspired the writing of 'The Language of Water'.

Steiner, George, *Language and Silence, Essays 1958 -1996*, (London: Faber and Faber 1958).

- Steiner's passion to re-examine the natures of literature and thought is illuminated in these essay collections. He focuses on individual writers, mostly with a Jewish connection in the first collection containing as well as discussing the role of the critic, the teaching of language and literature, communist and Holocaust literature.

Steiner George, *Real Presences,* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989).

- In this collection of essays Steiner examines the spiritual dimension of art, philosophy and language and argues that a transcendent or divine presence is the essential missing mystical element of artistic expression. I found his work a challenge to read, although it raised many questions concerning the nature of language and existence which I would like to examine further.

Strand, Mark, *The Monument*, (New York: Norton & Co. 1995).
Reasons For Moving, (New York: Scribner, 1972).
New Selected Poems, (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2007).

- The simplicity and clarity of Strand's language contrasted with the playful, surreal subject matter enable the poems to carry an enormous emotional content whilst appearing almost whimsical at times. I love the way his poems seem to tell us everything and nothing at the same time, leaving the reader with a slightly uneasy feeling and many unanswered questions. The correlation with language and philosophy in his work offered much inspiration when writing the poems for this collection.

Woolf, Derek, 'The Art of Pauline Stainer', *Notre Dame Review*, issue 7, (Winter 1999). www.nd.edu/~ndr/issues/ndr7/stainer/art.html [accessed 19/09/2012].

- Presents a useful interpretation of Stainer's body of work through close analysis of key poems throughout her career. Helped me to understand the importance of mystery, and the power of imagination in Stainer's work, and to apply this to my own poems.

www.poetryfoundation.org. [accessed/19/08/2012].

- This website presents bibliographies of a variety of poets, offering informative articles and an online magazine discussing aspects of poetry.

www.structureandsurprise.wordpress.com/theory-the-self-reflexive-turn/ [accessed 15/08/2012].

- This blog site discusses a range of approaches to writing poems and included an interesting feature on self-reflexive poetry, as well as providing links to, and dissecting examples of this form.